SFExaminer SEP 21 1971

Quentin Autopsy

New Version: Bullet in Back Killed Jackson

By Stephen Cook

Soledad Brother George Jackson was slain by a bullet fired into the middle back, not—as authorities first stated—through the top of his skull.

This information, disclosed today in a final autopsy report released by Marin County Coroner Donovan O. Cooke, was expected to raise anew challenges to the San Quentin Prison version of Jackson's violent death Aug. 21.

Prison officials claim the 30 year old black author, convict and avowed militant was cut down by bullets fired from two 20 foot high gun towers during a seemingly suicidal break for freedom.

Five other men — three guards and two prisoners — were slain after Jackson allegedly pulled a smuggled gun from beneath an Afro wig in the prison's adjustment center that day, according to prison administrators.

This story, doubted publicly by Jackson's relatives and supporters and disclaimed by other prisoners in the adjustment center that day, was bolstered two days later by a report from the Marin coroner's office.

On Aug. 23, Dr. Cooke, his assistant, Eugene R. Fontaine, and his investigator, Keith Craig, all said Jackson was apparently killed by a bullet which entered the top center of his skull.

The slug crashed through the brain, down the neck, and along the right side of the spine, fracturing two ribs and causing a rib bone to fracture the right lung, and

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exited the middle back, they said.

Either the same bullet or a second slug struck Jackson in the left ankle, fracturing a bone and lodging there, they said.

Craig and Fontaine, both of whom were at the scenes of the slayings Aug. 21, said the autopsy seemed to run against charges that Jackson was slain in his cell, then placed in the prison yard.

Fontaine cited the amount of blood at the spot where they found the body and Craig said the condition of the body indicated Jackson was killed during strenuous physical activity, such as running.

Today's report reveals that the pathologist, Dr. John Manwaring, had doubts just hours after Jackson's death as to where the fatal bullet entered the body.

After checking with ballistics experts, he said he concluded the bullet entered Jackson's middle back, broke two ribs, traveled up the spine through the brain and exited the top of the skull — just the opposite of the path described by Dr. Cooke.

"It is impossible to be certain of the direction of this bullet pending consultations with ballistics experts and opportunities to see the clothing.

Ballistics

At the conclusion of his final report, he stated:

"Ballistics consultation confirms that the entry wound was made in middle back and the exit at the top of the skull."

The question raised by this new information is:

Could Jackson have been killed by a bullet fired from a 20 foot gun tower located some distance to his rear?

"Almost impossible," was the first reaction of San Quentin information officer Joseph O'Brien.

Other law enforcement officers, though, theorized Jackson could have been struck first by a bullet to the ankle and could have been falling with his head lower than his torso when the second bullet entered his back from the rear.

Assumption

Dr. Cooke and investigator Craig offered similar explanations, both based on the assumption that the first bullet hit Jackson's ankle.

"If he was flat on the ground he could have been shot that way through the back," Dr. Cooke said.

"Of course, this is only speculation, but he certainly could have been on his knees with his head down."

Dr. Cooke said he believes its the task of the district attorney, not the coroner, to determine who did the shooting, from what position and under what circumstances.

"My primary task is to determine what killed a person. I haven't gone to San Quentin or attempted to reconstruct the scene. That's within the realm of the district attorney," Dr. Cooke said.

District Attorney Bruce Bales was unavailable for comment.

When told the bullet trajectory theories of Craig and Dr. Cooke, information officer O'Brien said he, too, though it was possible Jackson was in such a position.

It is still the prison's contention that Jackson was killed by shots fired from one of two gun towers with a line of sight that day, he said.